

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 10

Issue 1 March 2007

Article 27

3-1-2007

Cloth in West African History

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Recommended Citation

Kriger, Colleen E. and Thomson, Madia (2007) "Cloth in West African History," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 27.

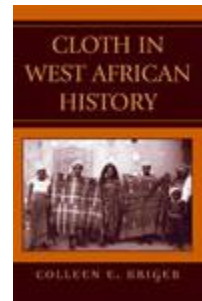
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Book Review

Colleen E. Kriger. *Cloth in West African History*. The African Archaeology Series. Lanham, Maryland: Altamira Press, Hardcover ISBN 0-7591-0421-2, Paperback ISBN 0-7591-0422-0, 240 pp., July 2006.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Madia Thomson, Independent Scholar, Philadelphia.



Drawing on artifacts, oral, and written sources, Colleen Kriger attempts to understand and present "the collective values and achievements" of West African people in her book *Cloth in West African History*. Using the textile industry as her lens on society, Kriger opens with a quote from a visitor to the Dahomey Kingdom, a certain Robert Norris, which discusses the importance of cloth in ritual gift exchange. The purpose of the book seems clear: to show the importance of cloth in society and to explain how that importance or value had changed over time. Were it something clearly stated rather than inferred from the quote, it would be an effective, yet simple way of providing a linking idea for the general discussion as well as establishing her work as historical. One discovers with more reading, however, that the form of the book and Kriger's style makes it difficult to follow any one theme let alone talk about a history of cloth. The imagined essential theme suggested on page one disappears very quickly.

One of the difficulties may be that Kriger tends to make uncertain statements that show that she is thinking rather than that she has thought. After the quote mentioned above, one reads much about the nature of textiles, but little about the reason for her choice. She offers no clear statement of what she plans to do until page seven, when she writes that she wants to tell a history of textiles using three artifacts. This idea clearly determined the form of the book. Chapter One is clearly a "light" chapter used as a way of getting to what she considers the more important sections of the book: those that discuss the artifacts. Chapters Two through Four are dedicated to this purpose. A brocaded wrapper from Bida, a pair of trousers from Northern Nigeria, and an indigo-dyed wrapper from Ibadan therefore open the narrative in these three chapters. Noticeably longer than the first, these central chapters are in fact where one begins to see what Kriger would like to do; use a textile as the basis for a larger discussion of culture and society. Even at this point however, the themes are not clear. Kriger has much to say about the textiles, the place one finds them, and how they were produced. Yet while there is much information, there is little said. The nice smooth story that began on page one is gone. Instead of finding a strong statement that links the chapters with a central theme, Kriger simply continues to think about her ideas on paper.

In addition to the lack of unifying theme, Kriger, tends to repeat information that was, admittedly, tiresome from the start and does not improve with re-telling. In Chapter One for example, she gives a detailed description of how fibers curl around a spinning rod, noting that the shape they form can help identify the spinning technique or the fiber in question. It seems a useful bit of information for people who do not weave and so, it is a

shame that she does not say so directly (one needs to interpret). When repeated in subsequent chapters as superfluous detail that little to the discussion, it loses its appeal. It occasionally reads as a way of proving what was said in Chapter One about spin direction rather than adding any substantive detail. There is no interesting history told about it. I would much rather read Ingrid Bergman's *Late Nubian Textiles* or Grace Crowfoot *Methods of Handspinning* which she footnotes. It really becomes a bit of a blur when on page eleven Kriger writes about Nubian spinning to say that "the spindle, held in the right hand with the whorl on top would produce thread with an s-twist, the opposite of how West African spinners held their spindles and made their z-spun yarns" This does not seem complicated. That she mentions this difference after a brief description of spin directions further obscures the text. A similar confusion might arise depending on whether the spinner was left- or right-handed. Her repeated references to detail that may be useful for distinguishing West African weaving technique from Nubian but gives offers little insight into the region under discussion adds little to the story.

In the midst of this obscurity comes the occasional moment of clarity, however, as in the section titled "Weavers, Wrappers, and Trade in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century." In its opening pages, that is, pages forty-four to forty-six, Kriger situates her discussion of cloth in the context of socio-economic change in the Bight of Benin. She reminds us that the trade in slaves existed along side the trade in textiles and that as the trade in slaves declined, the palm oil industry grew. She also notes how some cloth industry workers adapted to the changes. New wealth from the growing oil palm industry that might have gone to foreign exporters could be directed to them. Unlike others of earlier centuries who might have chosen to produce lower-priced (and potentially lower quality?) goods, Kriger writes that cloth industry workers in nineteenth-century Akwete, Nigeria responded by producing high quality cloth for potential high-end clients (p. 45). This is by no means obvious, and she does well to note it. Approaching what one expects from the first two pages, this section contains the elements of an interesting history. Methods, people, and textiles interact in response to changes in the political economy of a given region. As a flowchart, it might read:

Akwete Textile Workers Make Cloth as Slave Trade Declines ----
Competition from Foreign Imports Act as Catalyst ----
Perceptions of Akwete Cloth and Value Improves.

A quote from a primary source would only help the narrative by providing the always interesting detail of a fine history. One reads these bursts of engaging prose, and then, as Kriger does not maintain the level throughout the chapter, loses them again. They are quite nice and refreshing when they appear and one wishes that the entire book read as well.

For someone looking for an elegant history of textiles in Africa, Kriger's *Cloth in West African History* is not the answer. Its form -- chapters of uneven length followed by endnotes, that lack of useful or misplaced graphics -- disrupts the flow of the text . Emphasizing fluidity, sometimes to the neglect of interesting and the addition of useless detail, Kriger's style itself prevents one from actually reading the elegant story suggested on the opening page. The combination of storytelling and attention to what might be called

minutiae is often off-putting. For someone simply interested in the details of cloth and weaving in West Africa however, Kruger is just fine.